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The Difficult Normalisation of Relations between Arab Countries and Bashar al-Assad

From International Journals, Think Tank Publications and Arab News Media, 2019–2020

Sarah Ch. Henkel

The Syrian civil war seems to have been decided in favour of the regime of President Bashar al-Assad. Meanwhile, the process and the debate about the normalisation of relations between Arab states and Syria, as well as the country's possible readmission into the Arab League (AL), have already begun. A return to normality would help strengthen the legitimacy of the Syrian regime. This, however, would run counter to efforts by Germany, the European Union (EU) and the USA, who seek to force the Syrian regime by means of sanctions and isolation to negotiate a political solution to the conflict. In addition to Syria's contentious return to the AL, the articles examined here discuss the motives of those Arab countries wishing to normalise relations with Damascus, and the influence that external actors and the Covid pandemic exert on this process.

Beyond the military victory brought about by Russia and Iran, the Assad regime crucially needs legitimisation, especially from the Arab world, to consolidate its authority and reconstruct the country. The debate about the rapprochement between Arab states and Damascus is marked by controversy. The majority of these states supported Assad's enemies at the start of the conflict. His uncompromising war also seriously destabilised neighbouring countries, above all Jordan and Lebanon. Yet at no point during the civil war was Syria wholly isolated — not even after its exclusion from

the AL in November 2011. Maghreb countries, Iraq and Oman, for example, were mostly neutral towards the Syrian government. Moreover, Russia's intervention already foreshadowed in 2015 that the Assad regime would remain in place. Since then, various events have accelerated the discussion about the normalisation of relations between Arab countries and the Assad regime: first, the reopening of the UAE's and Bahrain's embassies in Damascus in December 2018; second the (failed) attempt to have Syria readmitted to the AL in March 2019, driven by Tunisia, Algeria



and presumably Egypt; and third, the reinstatement of Oman's ambassador to Damascus on 4 October 2020.

This journal review examines this debate with a particular focus on Jordan and Lebanon, which are not involved in the Syrian civil war but have nonetheless been strongly impacted by it. The review will also examine those countries that have assumed the role of opinion leaders through their active commitment and positioning in favour of normalising relations: the UAE and Egypt. It will draw on analyses by Arab, American, European and Russian researchers, published in 2019 and 2020 in Arab and international think tanks, journals and Arab news media.

The Trend towards Normalisation

The dominant debate on the readmission of Syria to the AL often evokes the lack of regional consensus for such institutional reintegration of Damascus. While some articles call on Arab countries not to accommodate Syria, equally there is criticism of the organisation's current state and the increasingly authoritarian governments of its member states. Other commentators even suspect that Damascus could exploit the dire situation to its advantage.

In an article for *Atlantic Council*, the Middle East analysts **Ali Hussein Bakeer** and **Giorgio Cafiero** argue that despite a trend among Arab countries towards normalising their relations with Syria the question of Assad's legitimacy strongly polarises the region. The UAE, Bahrain, Iraq and North African countries have called for and encouraged the resumption of bilateral relations with Damascus as well as Syria's return to the AL. Relations with its neighbour Jordan have been steadily improving as well. Saudi Arabia and Egypt have pointed out the necessity of a UN-led political solution to the civil war, and only Qatar has categorically rejected normalising relations with Syria.

Imad K. Harb is the director of the *Arab Center Washington DC*, a research institution

that is affiliated with the *Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies* in Doha. He writes that, ironically, it is the differences of opinion between Arab countries that have prevented them from taking the "foolish and costly decision" to rashly readmit Syria to the AL. In his view, the Arab world has to "hold on to at least a veneer of respectability" and make any resumption of relations with Assad's government conditional on the regime atoning for its crimes and initiating a political process. However, he adds, most Arab governments are authoritarian themselves and meanwhile gladly refrain from calling for a democratic transition in Syria.

According to the *Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies* — a research, cultural and media institute headquartered in Doha and Istanbul, and affiliated with Doha's *Arab Center* — it is unlikely that Arab countries will give the Syrian regime, its methods and hostile posture towards them free rein. The main Arab actors involved in Syria, it claims, have no interest in Syria's "victorious return" to the AL because they have their own priorities, interests and conditions, which Assad would have to meet before his government could enjoy reintegration into the region. Yet, the authors argue that Arab governments' normalisation of relations with Assad serve them as the latest evidence of the futility of their own peoples' uprisings. Ever since the failure of the AL's initiative to mediate the Syrian civil war in 2011, the organisation is paralysed and its policies mostly reflect their member states' divergences. Yet, the organisation has become a means to protect Arab rulers and legitimate the suppression of their people.

Tatyana Shmeleva, a Middle East researcher with the *Russian International Affairs Council* (RIAC), a think tank close to the Russian government, believes that AL members that voted to expel Syria from the organisation have no business lecturing Syria on democracy and human rights. Syria, she writes, does not depend on the AL and could afford to wait for more favourable conditions in the region for its re-accession.

Daniel L. Byman of the *Center for Middle East Policy* at the *Brookings Institution*, seen as close to the US Democrats, also views Damascus as being in a position of strength towards the Arab world and the West. For Byman, the fear of continued instability, especially at Syria's borders, has caused neighbouring countries to resume contact with the Assad regime, albeit quietly. The Syrian regime, he suggests, could demand financial support and structured cooperation from its neighbours and the EU for re-admitting Syrian refugees. Further, he believes that a limited terrorism problem, deliberately controlled by Damascus, could help the Syrian government obtain European and US support and present itself as part of a counterterrorist coalition. To that end, Byman writes, Assad may release jihadists of the so-called Islamic State from prison, as he did at the outbreak of the civil war, to exert pressure on potential cooperation partners.

Diverging Motives

The debate about what motivates countries to strive to normalise relations with Syria shows a complex mix of issues. For Jordan and Lebanon, commentators write that their economic interests and domestic politics are decisive, as well as the fact that the Syrian civil war has had a big impact on them. The UAE's and Egypt's motives, however, are according to observers best accounted for by the countries' financial and security interests, and geopolitical rivalry with Iran and Turkey.

In an article for the report "Rebuilding Syria" published by the *Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale* (ISPI) in Milan, the Lebanese Middle East analyst **Bachar El-Halabi** describes how Lebanon's and Jordan's pressing economic needs are urging these countries to be open towards Damascus. In the medium term, he believes, both countries will have to tap the economic potential offered by the reconstruction of Syria and use their strategically and logistically favourable location, even if the

political price risks being too high. In Lebanon, he points out, rapprochement with Syria also has a domestic driver: the steady strengthening of Hezbollah, Assad's ally, has shifted the discourse in Beirut towards resuming relations with its neighbour. According to El-Halabi, Lebanese politicians' instrumentalisation of the one million Syrian refugees in the country – the largest refugee-per-inhabitant ratio anywhere in the world – has turned public opinion in favour of entering into talks with Damascus for the sake of the return of refugees. The repatriation of refugees is also a priority for Jordan in its relations with Syria. As Jordan's ailing economy further suffered from several years of border closures with Iraq and Syria, the reopening of border crossings, he writes, is another key reason for its exchanges with Damascus.

Mohammed Bani Salameh and **Ayman Hayajneh** of Yarmouk University in Irbid, Jordan, devote an article in the *Middle East Quarterly*, a journal published by the *Middle East Forum* headquartered in Philadelphia, USA, to the situation in Jordan. They emphasise that the country is becoming ever more dependent on foreign aid by the US, the EU and the Gulf states due to its socio-economic and political problems, which are exacerbated by the refugee crisis. This, they point out, significantly limits Amman's room for manoeuvre in foreign policy: Jordan has to meet its donors' demands to position itself against Assad while also having to contend with its own concerns about the Syrian uprising and the Syrian opposition. They conclude that Amman's tightrope act of reconciling complex and often contradictory domestic, regional and international interests in relation to Syria in a coherent approach is becoming increasingly difficult.

The French-Lebanese journalist **Mona Alami** writes in her article for the *Atlantic Council* that Hezbollah and its allies misuse Lebanon as a platform for supporting Assad. This misuse, she claims, significantly contributes to the country's collapse and irreversibly ties Lebanon's fate to that of Syria. For her, Hezbollah's military involvement

in the Syrian civil war — which runs counter to the Lebanese government's decision from 2012 to disassociate itself from Assad and the conflict — has turned Lebanon into a pariah state and distanced it from its Arab and Western partners. She points out that despite Lebanon's heavy national debt and dwindling currency reserves, Hezbollah along with other pro-Syrian parties continues to ensure that Syria is supplied with subsidised food and oil. Due to its cooperation with Damascus, she states, Beirut not only exacerbates tensions with the US and the Gulf states whose support it relies on to overcome the economic and financial crisis; it also risks US sanctions as part of the Caesar Act.

Chafic Choucair, a researcher of Lebanese origin at the *Al Jazeera Centre for Studies* in Doha, comes to the conclusion that saving Lebanon from collapse will require not just the implementation of economic reforms and a new social contract, but above all Beirut's disengagement from Syria and Iran. In his analysis, the explosion in the port of Beirut and the possibility that Hezbollah was indirectly or directly involved deepens the social divide between those who support Hezbollah's dominant role and Beirut's association with Damascus, and those who call for disarming the militia and establishing closer relations with Saudi Arabia and the West. The formation of a Lebanese unity government is crucial, he believes, for overcoming the country's divisions and multiple crises. This would require a regional and international consensus, including with Iran, on neutralising Lebanon; which would also mean Hezbollah having to withdraw from Syria and retreat into Lebanon's interior. If this fails, he fears that Lebanon might get caught up in further regional conflicts alongside Syria.

To decrease Iran's influence in the region, the UAE and Bahrain are gradually seeking closer ties with Assad's government, according to **Giorgio Cafiero**, the founder of *Gulf State Analytics*, in *Inside Arabia*, an Arab-American online news magazine based in Washington D.C. By

seeking a rapprochement with Damascus, he writes, the two Gulf states plan to consolidate Syria's place in the Sunni Arab world. However, Cafiero sees no indications that Assad would want to break with Tehran. Nevertheless, he points out, the two Gulf monarchies could render Damascus two important services that neither Iran nor Russia can provide: the Gulf states could contribute financially to the reconstruction of Syria and promote Syria's rapprochement with the US and EU. For him, the legacy of the 2003 Iraq War, which exposed the Arab world to Iran's influence, strongly motivates Abu Dhabi and Bahrain to reach out to Damascus.

Joseph Daher, a Swiss-Syrian Associate Professor at the *European University Institute* (EUI) in Florence, takes issue with this in his study for the project *Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria*. He argues that it is misleading to assume that the normalisation of relations between the UAE and Assad is based on Abu Dhabi's efforts to counter Iran's and Turkey's influence in Syria. For him, the UAE's rapprochement with Damascus is instead based on regional political developments, the resulting shift in Abu Dhabi's foreign policy priorities, and economic interests. In 2011 and 2012, the UAE followed its partners from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in condemning Assad and supporting the opposition. However, Daher points out, diplomatic and economic channels to Damascus remained informally open, and the UAE sheltered members of the Syrian regime. He ascribes the UAE's absence from the Syrian conflict between 2015 and 2018 to Abu Dhabi's competing foreign policy priorities in Libya and Yemen, and the boycott of Qatar since 2017. In his view, mutual interests in reviving economic relations were an important factor in the rapprochement between Syria and the UAE, with the latter having investment opportunities in real estate, luxury products, transport and trade — sectors which traditionally benefited significantly from Emirati foreign direct investment before 2011, as the second-largest Arab investor. According to Daher, the Syrian civil

war has generated a new economic elite that is loyal to the regime, while the Syrian commercial diaspora in the UAE which previously acted as middlemen lost its network in Damascus. Possible foreign investment in Syria thus needs to go through business networks connected with Assad.

Economic interests, especially those concerning the reconstruction of Syria, are also a motive for Egypt to seek contact with Damascus, writes the Egyptian journalist **Albaraa Abdullah** on the Arab-American news website *Al-Monitor*. However, he sees Cairo's primary focus as being stability: Egyptian President al-Sisi, himself a military man, supports the Syrian army because he considers the integrity of Syria as fundamental for the security and stability of Egypt. [The main focus here is the regional fight against Islamist groups; editor's note]. As Egypt is not involved in the war in Syria, maintains contacts with both the regime and parts of the opposition, and has brought about a ceasefire between Syrian opposition factions in the past, Cairo is for Abdullah best suited to mediate between Syria, the region's countries and the international community.

Great Powers and Arab Interests

International commentators agree that Russia has become the dominant foreign power in the Arab world, but that the threat of US and EU sanctions outweighs this status, and prevents the Arab world's relations with the Syrian regime from being normalised. Non-Western observers criticise that the political and economic isolation of Syria imposed by the US and EU aims to whitewash their reluctance to intervene in the Syrian civil war as well as the failure of their democratisation policies in the region.

Ziyad Majid, a Lebanese Professor in Middle East Studies at the *American University* in Paris, writes in an article for the *Al Jazeera Centre for Studies* in Doha that the decision of Arab countries to follow up their original rejection of the Syrian regime with the normalisation of relations with

Damascus marks a new phase in the Syrian conflict. In Majid's view, Washington's reticent policy towards the Syrian regime, even when the latter deployed chemical weapons, convinced the Arab world that the US had no desire to topple Assad despite its initial mobilisation against him. Russia subsequently rescued the Syrian regime by intervening from 2015 onwards and created new facts on the ground, inter alia as part of the Astana process. According to Majid, Western and Arab governments tolerated this new status quo, which paved the way for the resumption of contact with Damascus by some Arab states, spurred on by the Kremlin. Had it not been for the sanctions imposed by the US and the EU other Arab countries would have been likely to join the UAE's energetic push towards normalisation. The main reasons for most Arab countries avoiding further risks in seeking rapprochement with Assad, according to Majid, are the severity of the sanctions, Washington's unpredictable course vis-à-vis Iran, and the unforeseeable consequences of a definitive US withdrawal from Syria.

The afore-mentioned article by **Tatyana Shmeleva** of the *Russian International Affairs Council* also represents the Russian perspective, which views the West's isolation of Syria as powerful, but fundamentally flawed. The author explains that the West is preventing Syria's reintegration into the region, as the legitimisation of the Syrian government by Arab countries would lay bare the failure of the West's Syria policy while demonstrating the effectiveness of Russia's.

Less biased but similarly critical is the article by **Eyal Zisser**, vice rector of Tel Aviv University, in *Middle East Quarterly*: he considers that the Syria policy adopted by the West (here, the US) and the resulting isolation of the Assad regime are still guided by the "delusion of regional democratisation". For him, Assad's brutality against his own people as well as his alliance with Moscow and Tehran have made the attainment of these ideals more remote, and herald the end of Pax Americana in the region. In

Zisser's analysis, Russia emerges as the true victor of the conflict, and allows Moscow to regain its long-lost status as the mightiest foreign power in the Middle East.

In an article for the English-language daily *The National*, published in Abu Dhabi, the journalist and essayist **Faisal Al Yafai** speaks out against the USA and Russia influencing the relations between Arab states and Syria. Russia's aim in pressing Arab states to re-establish relations with Assad, he writes, is to attract funds for Syria's costly reconstruction, which Moscow will be involved in for the medium to long term. While the US is right to ostracise the regime, Al Yafai points out, the sanctions also punish the civilian population and encourage Damascus to destabilise the region further. In his view, the US and Arab countries take up diametrically opposed positions: the US is convinced that isolating Assad will sooner or later force him to relinquish his alliance with Iran; from the Arab perspective, however, it is precisely this exclusion of Syria that is driving the country into the arms of Russia and Iran. Al Yafai therefore concludes that neither the US nor Russia can contribute to improving conditions for Syrians within or outside of Syria, and that it is high time for Arab countries to decide what relationship with Syria is in their own interest.

The Covid-19 Pandemic

Various articles on the effects of the coronavirus pandemic in the Middle East show that the crisis seems to favour the normalisation of diplomatic relations between Arab countries and Damascus.

An example is an article by **Sandy Alkoutami** and **Khulood Fahim**, a Syrian-American and an Egyptian *James C. Gaither Junior Fellow* at the *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* in Washington D.C. They write that countries such as Jordan, the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain have used the exceptional circumstances of the pandemic to justify their softening stance vis-à-vis the Syrian regime. This, the authors say, con-

tributes to a wider acceptance of Assad's rule both regionally and internationally. In their view, particularly the posturing of the UAE's Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Zayid could be instrumental for Syria's regional rehabilitation: he has emphasised that the humanitarian challenges presented by the pandemic outweigh any political issues between the two countries. The crisis is also convenient for Moscow, the authors argue, in its efforts to rehabilitate Assad's government in the region and internationally: Putin insists that Damascus serves as the sole administrator of crisis measures and aid delivered to Syria. The United Nations meanwhile have called for sanctions against Syria to be relaxed during the pandemic.

Khaled Yacoub Oweis, a Jordanian journalist and Middle East analyst, argues in an article for *The National* that the Syrian regime is aiming to capitalise politically on the crisis to blame the US and EU sanctions for the hardship in the country. As the Syrian regime seeks to rejoin the AL, Oweis writes, it affirms its independence from Iran issuing propaganda claiming that the virus was brought into the country by Shiite pilgrims from neighbouring countries rather than — as is generally assumed — by militias stationed in Syria and commanded by Tehran.

Conclusion

The debate shows a trend towards the bilateral normalisation of relations between some Arab countries and the Assad government. The articles reviewed here show how the lack of a regional consensus on Syria's readmittance to the AL and its political and economic isolation by the US and the EU are hampering the progress of Arab states normalising their relations with Syria. The authors largely welcome this fact, but they also point out that the implementation of EU and US policy towards Syria has an impact on the neighbouring countries — since it runs counter to their economic, domestic and security concerns. It also disregards the hardship in countries such as Jordan and

Lebanon that partly justifies their cooperation with Damascus.

The articles also make clear that the lack of unity among Arab countries and the paralysis of the AL inhibit the formulation and achievement of common Arab interests regarding Syria. The opinion leaders UAE and Egypt are pursuing their own commercial, security and geopolitical interests in their rapprochement with Damascus.

For their Syria policy, Germany and the EU should take into account both the debate and the dynamics of the normalisation process between the Arab world and Damascus, including the motives driving those involved. Together with the US, the German and European policy towards Syria continues to bank on forcing Damascus to change behaviour through political and economic isolation. However, governments should consider, as the authors illustrate, the political and economic intertwining of Syria and its neighbouring countries, as well as the destabilising potential of the refugee crisis for the region. The articles' critical perspectives on the incoherence of Europe's and America's approach vis-à-vis Syria and on the premises underpinning their Middle East policies should be food for thought for Berlin and Brussels.

Attention should be drawn to the appeals by several Arab authors for two things: more participation by Arab countries in peace negotiations for Syria, and more self-determination for Arab countries in shaping their relations with Damascus. The UAE and Egypt emerge from the debate as the key Arab actors able to influence the course of normalisation between Arab states and Syria. Germany and the EU need to be aware that Abu Dhabi and Cairo, backed by Moscow, are willing to undermine the West's policy of isolating the Syrian regime — and yet seek dialogue with them regardless, so as to be constructively involved in shaping the process of normalisation.

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